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The Era of the *Tassements* or Stockaded Trading Posts

By HUBERT M. SKINNER, President of the Porter County Historical Society

With the wild, stupendous dream of France that it could seize the interior of North America, making a highway of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi from Quebec to the Gulf of Mexico, came the era of the *tassements*, or stockaded trading posts made of logs set perpendicularly in the ground.

There were *tassements* erected all along the shores of the lakes and of the Mississippi and its eastern conflents. An endless passing of canoes kept all the *tassements* in touch, one with another. The men in the canoes were of three classes. They were traders, explorers and priests. All three classes were animated by a zeal amounting almost to frenzy. The French king paid the explorers; the great societies of the church supported the priests; and the profits of the fur trade animated the commercial men. The latter very generally married Indian wives.

It was long assumed that the Mississippi, discovered and crossed by De Soto in 1541, flowed out from one of the Great Lakes, though its source had not been discovered; nor was it found indeed for five generations after De Soto. In 1679, a water route involving a *portage* (or carrying place for canoes) of four miles (from the site of South Bend to the Kankakee) was discovered, to connect Lake Michigan with the Mississippi via the St. Joseph, the Kankakee, and the Illinois rivers. There were three other routes with portages. The Fox and Wisconsin rivers constituted one of these; the Chicago and the Des Plaines rivers another; and the Maumee and headwaters of the Wabash, the third.

With the *tassements* of the great chain were usually mission houses, Indian tepees or lodges, etc., and many of these posts became the nuclei of future cities. The *tassements* conspicuous for their missions took, usually, the names of the latter, being dedicated to some saint, as St. Joseph, St. Louis, etc. Some were named for civil or military officers; as Carondelet, Vincennes, etc. Some were so little noted as to be called simply, the "Poste," or the "Tassement."

The romantic era of the *tassements* closed in 1763, when the French power in North America was completely overthrown. It had lasted from 1673, when the first two of the four portage waterways between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi were discovered. Its story, little written, lived in the folklore of the Indians of the West. The funerals, weddings, masses, baptisms, councils, trades, treaty makings, accidents, surprises, reunions, fights, bargains, births, celebrations, etc., connected with every *tassement* might fill volumes, if they had been recorded. This story is all lost to us in those parts of the country where the chain of tradition was rudely snapped and completely broken off by the sudden removal of the Indians in a body to make room for the white settlers of a new era, early in the last century.

The very word *tassement* has dropped out of use in both its French and its English forms. It is not now to be found with the definition of "palisade" in any dictionary or cyclopedia that is in use. It is rarely used in any sense. By an old rule for rendering French words in English phonetic equivalents, the French syllable *ment* was always written *mong* in English; and in such words as this, the middle vowel was represented by "i," to make sure that the word would be pronounced in three syllables. Thus the English equivalent of *tassement* was *tassimong*. This rule of equivalents has long been eliminated from our best English dictionaries. It was observed that, while bookish people pronounced such words according to the English spelling, those who were guided by the ear and not by the written word said *marv* (not *mong*), sometimes giving a very slight nasal sound to the syllable. This indeed was always a test, showing that the sound of the word was acquired orally by those who spoke it thus.

French scholars and teachers, people of wide reading and culture, will tell you, today, that they never heard or saw the word *tassement* in all their lives. You may search for it in vain in the modern French lexicons and cyclopedias. It is only in the rare writing of centuries gone that you can find it.

It so happens that the last of all the "tassimongs" to bear this name is to be found in my native county—the only Porter county in the world—in Indiana. There is a touch of sentiment in this fact. Students of literature love to see the old word *mark* lingering in two places on the map of Europe, in the names of Den-

mark and Steiermarck (Styria). Formerly it meant a country, as in the lines:

This was the dwelling of Volsung, the king of the Midworld's Mark,
Like a rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark.

It was used, slightly varied, in many languages, but has strangely dropped out of use.

Old maps of Porter county, likewise, are the last in the world to bear the name Tassimong, accidentally varied by the substitution of *n* for *m*, and written *Tassinong*.

A century ago, when there were no white inhabitants within the limits of our country, old Tassinong was the only locality within those limits that was named as a point to reckon from. White men were periodically visiting that part of the country, and all of these traders, missionaries, etc., were familiar with the location of the ancient French trading post, which was then only a memory of the Indians.

The earliest settlers of the country always called it "Tassinaw," much to the amusement of those who were familiar with the English spelling of the name. This fact is a conclusive proof that they acquired the pronunciation by oral transmission, through an unbroken line of generations, from the old historic era of the French *tassemens*, the Indians having handed it down.

How old is *Tassinong*? When was the stockade built by the French at this point?

La Salle descended the Kankakee river in 1679, and he passed through the land of Porter county on foot three times within the next two years, following the Old Sac Trail. There were no Indians then living in what is now Indiana. About two hundred years ago the Indians came to what is now northern Indiana, from the north and the northeast. The country north of the Kankakee was very rich in fur-bearing animals, for these had not suffered from the depredations of men, and had become wonderfully numerous, attracting the fur trader, and richly rewarding the Indian hunter and trapper. Hither the trader came, and erected his rude *tassemens*, which was at once a store, bazaar for the display of trinkets for sale, a temporary dwelling, and a place secure from marauders. It is interesting to note that the earliest meaning of the word *tassemens* was a collection of goods, or articles, as for display or for sale. That it came to mean also a simple stockade or palisade was due, doubtless, to the fact that the French stockades

of this class were of service as trading posts, this being the most important thing to both Indians and traders. Our Tassinong answered to both definitions of the word. Just when this *tassement* of the French was erected, and just where the stockade stood, nobody seems to know. Probably it was among the earliest in Indiana. It is easy to suppose that its establishment was nearly two centuries ago, or within a quarter-century after La Salle became familiar with this vicinity.

It is quite natural to suppose that it is as old as Vincennes, though it was never conspicuous enough to have any name but the "*Tassement*" among the French. It was not on the line of the Old Sac Trail, though a branch of the trail led down to it. Because of the superior ease of transportation of merchandise, *tassements* were nearly always located on the banks of rivers. Our Tassinong, however, was situated some distance north of the river, on the up-land and away from the swamp, but conveniently near to it. Whether the old stockade was destroyed by the English about 1763, when they took possession of the western country, or whether it was left slowly to disintegrate as an abandoned post, or whether it long remained as a rendezvous for English fur buyers and for the red sellers of furs, is not known. An abandoned stockade does not usually last very long. The logs begin to lean in or out, and finally fall. They offer convenient fuel for the campfires of sojourners, and are serviceable for other purposes. Possibly some light might be thrown on the site of the ancient stockade by a careful study of any relics that were found by pioneers of the vicinity.

Seventy years ago, old Tassinong was something of a village and trading point for farmers. Gil Pierce grew to manhood in Tassinong, and so did Judge A. D. Bartholomew. Gil Pierce's political career was highly honorable—brilliant, in fact; but he will be remembered chiefly as the man of letters and of society, an ornament to the nation. And if his boyhood home dates back two centuries—as seems likely—his *Dickens Dictionary* will probably last through twice two centuries more. I could wish that he had busied himself somewhat with the archaeology of old Tassinong. Judge Bartholomew's fine legal mind and forceful character have won for him an enviable place in the ranks of jurists. Perhaps some day he may give reminiscences of a boyhood passed on the site of one of the most ancient posts in Indiana, which alone on the maps of the nation has preserved its ancient name, being in all the world the last of the *Tassements*.